

# Enlightenment by sound-bites

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"Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?" -- Matthew 22:36 (NRSV).

If you are a teacher, what would you teach if you are only allowed one minute? If you are a politician or a political candidate, how would you summarise your message in 15 seconds while the camera is rolling for the next newscast? And if you are a seeker of the truth, what one message would you take to the heart, among probably thousands of hours of teachings?

Those who are from media and mass communication industries may be familiar with the way everything is reported in broadcast and print. In newspapers we have something called "the inverted pyramid." At the top of this upside triangle is what is called a "lead," a short 20- to 30-word paragraph that summarises the whole essence of the story you are telling.

For those who may not be familiar with this concept, let us take one example from yesterday's news:

Hurricane Wilma began its crawl up the Gulf of Mexico toward Florida today after battering Mexico's Yucatan Peninsula the past two days with winds as high as 100 mph. (Source: Bloomberg news report, Oct. 23, 2005)

This is the first paragraph of a news story about the hurricane. It contains 28 words, 166 characters, just short enough for text-messaging to your cell phone. Perhaps you all know this on the subconscious level, but if we read the first one or two paragraphs of each story and look at pictures that go with them, we all get the feeling that we know the news--at least on the surface. From this paragraph alone, we can tell **what** the news is, **when** it happened, **where** it is affecting, and **how** it is a significant event: This is about **Hurricane Wilma**, which is passing from **Yucatan** and heading **Florida today**, and it is a serious problem because **we don't usually deal with winds that's twice as fast as a running car**. You get an idea. If you're in Florida, pack up and get out; if you have relatives or friends there, you'd be concerned.

Since the 1980s, world news has been distributed worldwide through the new medium called satellite television. Until then, most news came to your paper through "wire," which really meant telegraph and Telex back then, and be printed by your local newspaper. CNN changed all that--news all of sudden became available 24/7, live, as it was happening. The audiovisual nature of television also created the culture of sound-clips, in which news is reported through short recorded fragments of what people say. A typical sound-clip runs only for 5 to 15 seconds, with some excerpts from press conferences and public addresses running up to a minute. Usually it is the reporter and editors who make their own judgement as to what part of one's speech epitomises the overall nature of the whole speech. More sensationalist reporters tend to pick the most odd, entertaining or visually memorable parts, regardless of their contexts. Hence media-savvy politicians and public relations professionals are constantly mindful of what they say and how they say it.

This week's lectionary texts contain some of the "sound-bites" that would best reflect the overall concepts and messages of the Scriptures. After all, we are all busy and we live in such a state of information overload, so our attention span is getting shorter and shorter every day. So it's great to identify what are some of the most important ideas we can learn from this thick book: an "instant enlightenment by sound-bites."

**Matthew 22. Verse 34. (The Message) "When the Pharisees heard how he had bested the Sadducees, they gathered their forces for an assault."**

The Pharisees were a group of theologians and professors who made a whole academic discipline out of studying the Hebrew Bible and its traditional interpretations. The Sadducees, their rivals in power struggle, were mostly temple priests who knew all the ancient liturgy and how to correctly conduct it, but they did not necessarily give too much spiritual meaning to it. These two groups were constantly debating non-stop and vying for control, so when they heard someone debated with the Sadducees and shut them up, they wanted to hear from this guy who just did the impossible.

**Verses 35-36. One of their religion scholars spoke for them, posing a question they hoped would show him up: "Teacher, which command in God's Law is the most important?"**

Knowing that if he can elicit from Jesus one five-second sound clip that's controversial and sensational enough, a scholar interviewed Jesus in the presence of the Pharisee leadership, civic leaders and the general public. The scholar probably expected something that would sound so radical, violent, angry or controversial so he could frame Jesus.

But here's the sound bite:

**"Love...your God with all your passion and prayer and intelligence," This is the most important, the first on any list. But there is a second to set alongside it: "Love others as well as you love yourself." These two commands are pegs; everything in God's Law and the Prophets hangs from them. (vv. 37-40.)**

Out of thousands of verses in the Torah, he selected these two. Several years before Jesus, there was somebody, a non-Jewish person, who asked a famous rabbi of that time if the rabbi could teach him Judaism while he could stand on one foot. Here's the rabbi's sound clip:

**"What is hateful to you, do not do to your neighbour: that is the whole Torah; all the rest of it is commentary; go and learn." (Mishnah Shabbat 31a)**

There are many similar teachings found worldwide along the same line. Often called the Golden Rule, this is considered to be one of the most universal and foundational religious teachings. But Jesus took this two steps further.

First, unlike Rabbi Hillel and Confucius, he put the sentence in a way that requires followers to take an active, conscious choice. This is more than just "don't do this"; quoting from Leviticus 19:18 and Deuteronomy 6:5, Jesus called for an action of loving.

Second, he placed these two rules -- love of God and love of others as we love ourselves -- on a parallel and equal standing. Like a bridge, a trapeze or a hammock, "everything in God's law and the prophets" require both of these two columns in order to work. It is easier to have just one or the other. Many religious people may have the "love of God" part right, but may not love themselves -- and as a result not able to love other people. It's difficult not to be hateful toward others when we project our own self-hatred and anger onto others. Sometimes the kind of people I hate the most are the people who are actually like me. They share common interests, common activities, common goals and even common ideals.

On the other hand, it is also possible for many of us to love people but cannot seem to love God. We might say, "well, it's important to love our neighbours by acting justly and

accepting people as they are," and on and on, then turn around and say "but I don't really like God. I was burnt by churches and priests. I think I can be an atheist and still be loving."

I think there are good reasons why Jesus put these two elements as equally important.

Now what does it take to love our neighbours?

It is often said it is easier to "love" someone on the other side of the earth than someone we have to see every day. Many churches have some kind of mission or outreach program that may be set up to help refugees in Sudan, or poverty in Mexico. Such a program seems harmless and easy to many in church boards of directors. After all, all what we have to do is to use pre-printed brochures from relief agencies, show pre-packaged tear-jerking videos and collect donations and have bake-sales. We never have to get out of our comfort zone, and we still feel like we are a social-justice and mission minded church.

But it would be another story if your typical mainline church wants to set up an outreach ministry to the poor or mentally ill persons in its own neighbourhood. Usually a few board members object by keep bringing up "neighbour relations," security concerns, "adequacy of the facilities" or even "how it can affect the property values" and "how it may draw undesirable populations to our church and drive some 'important' members away." After years of circular and frustrating debates such ministries usually won't materialise. We tend to be hyperopic when it comes to loving.

Leviticus 19:2, 15-18

Speak to all the congregation of the people of Israel and say to them: You shall be holy, for I the Adonai your God am holy. You shall not render an unjust judgement; you shall not be partial to the poor or defer to the great: with justice you shall judge your neighbour. You shall not go around as a slanderer among your people, and you shall not profit by the blood of your neighbour: I am Adonai. You shall not hate in your heart anyone of your kin; you shall reprove your neighbour, or you will incur guilt yourself. You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against any of your people, but you shall love your neighbour as yourself: I am Adonai.

This is said in the context of "being holy." The word "holy" here is a translation of *kadosh*, meaning special, exceptional and different, standing out from all others. So this is a teaching on how we can be someone special.

In short, we have to be fair and balanced in judgement. But why does it say "do not be partial to the poor"? What about the "preferential option"? Isn't God a vindicator and advocate for the poor?

Think of a situation in which you were not treated as an equal and prevented from accessing a regular opportunity. Sometimes institutions that intend to give a "better opportunity" or "better services" for the disadvantaged can be very paternalistic and patronising. In such a system we are not really treated as human beings but as caseloads, diagnoses, or statistics. In it, we are judged solely on the basis of our income, our medical conditions, our ages or disabilities. But a truly fair justice requires a sight beyond our surface appearance and a few questions on an intake questionnaire form.

Now, here's the tough part: slander, resentment, hatred and grudge. I'm constantly guilty of all these. It's difficult to keep my mouth shut, and it's even more difficult to keep my mind clear of resenting and hating others -- particularly my "neighbours," someone whom I come in contact with often, or someone who may share similar circumstances. It's so easy to stand here and preach about solidarity and social justice, but whenever I come back to senses I examine what's on my heart only to realize that I'm not practicing what I'm preaching. Often times I am horrified by how quickly I had come to think of some people with such a hostility, contempt, resentment and hatred. And invariably these people once shared the same lot as myself, usually not so long time

ago. I am not perfect -- far from it. I am not some kind of holy person, even though I strive daily to put myself on the path to holiness. Being progressive Christians we often forget to talk about sins--the problems within our own hearts. By "sin" I do not mean whom you sleep with or any of those surface stuff. By "sin" I mean the insidious and destructive pattern within our minds and hearts that prevent us from becoming embodiments of love, and images and likeness of God who created us.

Over the last half a year I have been working to plant this church, with little "success." We have not yet come to the point where we can have a regular worship service. But it may have been a good thing that the church hadn't yet attracted a lot of people. With the kind of attitudes I had, and how quickly I lost my passion for justice and peace as soon as I settled myself down into my new position as a pastor and transitioned from being bored to death to being extremely busy. My living situation astronomically improved over the last year -- thanks to God's miraculous provision and a few generous donors. But recently I suddenly came to a realization that I was not living in integrity. A lot of things I do as part of my work is behind public view, largely unnoticeable and unappreciated. It also means I can slack off and cut corners at any time if I choose to. Then I found myself one day treating several people -- a few mentally ill people, a couple of homeless individuals -- with such hostility and contempt. And this is coming from somebody who once lived on streets for almost two years, and had been under severe mental illness for three years. All this smacks me of the servant in one of Jesus' parables, who was forgiven a massive debt and then went straight to someone who owed him a little bit of money and assaulted him demanding the money be returned. Over the last week I have been thinking seriously about whether I had the "right stuff" inside me to succeed and lead. Diligence, integrity, loyalty, there are a lot of factors. But it always comes back to that ultimate sound-clip lesson for solving the problems in our world.

Am I doing what is hateful if someone did this to me?

Am I loving myself, for it is the prerequisite for being capable of loving our "neighbours"?

Am I loving others, despite their differences and more importantly, similarities?

And do I love God?

And if I have come to be immortalized for generations by what I say and do, what kind of message -- what kind of sound-bite -- would I want to leave for the future generations?

"We are not pleased"?

"The earth was blue"?

"A small step for a man, a big step for the mankind"?

"I have a dream"?

"I don't know what you mean by 'is'"?

"Either you are with us or you are with the enemies"?

Or... what should my sound-bite be?

Today's lectionary text:

Deuteronomy 34:1-12 and Psalm 90:1-6, 13-17; or, Leviticus 19:1-2, 15-18 and Psalm 1

1 Thessalonians 2:1-8, Matthew 22:34-46

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